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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses service learning programs on community college campuses. Service learning integrates community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Projects can range from brief, one-time-only experiences to a student commitment of 15 or more hours during a semester. Typically, such course options are offered as an alternative to more traditional classroom assignments. Often, students are given the option of participating in a service learning project over the course of the semester and writing a paper based on the experience instead of writing a traditional research paper. One component of service learning that sets it apart from co-op placements or internships is the requirement of reflection. This can be accomplished in various ways: within a reflective journal over the course of the semester, in a meeting with the class instructor once or twice during the term, or in an instructor-facilitated group with other service learning students. Some service learning program directors have recommended that service learning be noted on student transcripts and described in college catalogues, and the academic rigor of service learning be emphasized and demonstrated to faculty. Contains 12 references. (JA)

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Digest

October, 2000 EDO-JC-00-10

Service Learning Programs on Community College Campuses

By Mary Prentice

During the last ten years, there has been an increasing demand from the public, from legislators, and from accrediting agencies for higher education to become more accountable for the learning that takes place in colleges and universities. Community colleges have been at the forefront of the burgeoning educational movement to become more learning-centered. The focus of the community college, now more than ever, is on being a learning institution (O'Banion, 1997). In step with this new focus, community college administrators and instructors have been on the lookout for new pedagogical techniques that will enhance classroom learning. One teaching tool that has been increasingly utilized is service learning (Franco, unpublished manuscript).

What is Service Learning?

While definitions of service learning vary, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) directors describe this instructional method as one that "integrates community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility" (Robinson, 1995, p. 1). In essence, it is an instructional strategy that links course content with service to the community (Simmons, 1998). Thus a student participating in a service learning project through his or her biology course may help to create a nature trail over the course of the semester, while students in a spring semester advanced accounting class may serve as supervised tax consultants for low income residents (Lee, 1997).

There are various ways of incorporating service learning into the curriculum. In all classrooms, "learning is the objective, and in service learning projects, experience is the vehicle through which learning occurs" (Soltys, 1997, p. 7). Service learning projects can range from brief, one-time-only experiences to a student commitment to a non-profit agency of 15 or more hours during a semester. Typically, such course options are offered as an alternative to more traditional classroom assignments. Often, students are given the option of participating in a service learning project over the course of the semester and writing a paper based on the experience instead of writing a traditional research paper.

One component of service learning that sets it apart from co-op placements or internships is the requirement of reflection. This can be accomplished in various ways: within a reflective journal over the course of the semester, in a meeting with the class instructor once or twice during the term, or in a instructor-facilitated group with other service learning students. The goal is to help the students think critically about their experiences at the service learning agency and in how those experiences tie in with their learning of the course material (Robinson, 1995).

Service Learning Best Practices

For those wishing to begin a service learning program at a particular community college, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has identified best practices for sustaining service learning programs in its 1998 AACC Project Brief (Robinson and Barnett, 1998). Summarized here is a sampling of some of the best practices for each constituency:

- Students: hold an orientation, hold reflection sessions, track outcomes, celebrate success
- Faculty: start with "believers," offer mini-grants, hold an orientation, celebrate success
- Institution: connect to existing initiatives, start small, celebrate success
- Community: create an advisory board, hold an orientation, celebrate success.

In addition, AACC service learning program directors have recommended that: 1) service learning should b[illegible]ted on student transcripts and describ[illegible] college catalog; 2) the academic rigor of service learning should be emphasized and demonstrated to faculty; 3) service learning should be written into course competencies; and 4) periodic presentations should be made to the board of trustees.

Robinson (1995) has also suggested that the issue of program sustainability should be at the forefront of program planning and development. To help facilitate this, those at AACC offer several suggestions. First, solicit upper level administrator's support from the beginning, especially that of the college president. Second, gain faculty senate support of the initiative. Third, involve the curriculum committee in revising and approving courses with service learning components. Fourth, establish a service learning team that is made up of faculty, staff, and administrators so that the responsibilities of running the program can be shared. Fifth, conduct special presentations for board members. Sixth, publicize the program to both the campus and the surrounding community. Finally, consider lobbying for a reallocation of student activity fees or portions of academic departmental budgets to support the program.

Examples of Specific Service Learning Programs

Kapi'olani Community College

Kapi'olani Community College in Hawaii, one of the ten colleges that were selected by AACC in 1994 to receive funds to develop or strengthen their service learning programs, has worked to integrate service learning into the pre-education major. Service learning is part of the Family Relations 230 (Human Development) class, which is a required course in the social

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science general education core. The service learning program coordinators also created a one-credit course for service learning students who wanted to help young children learn how to read. The course is entitled "Early Literacy Tutor Training" and incorporates early literacy experts who come to campus to train the students in the tutoring skills that they will need to help the children both in the students' service work and in their later teaching work (Franco, unpublished manuscript).

Miami-Dade Community College

The tradition of service learning at Miami-Dade Community College in Florida runs deep. Since 1994, over 8,000 students have completed service learning projects, which equates to over 200,000 hours of service to community agencies. Part of their success can be attributed to the development of comprehensive service learning centers with full-time coordinators on the three largest campuses. In addition, a service learning faculty coordinator on each campus works with faculty in using service learning as an instructional pedagogy. Projects were developed for courses ranging from dental hygiene to music appreciation. Students in the dental hygiene program, for example, were given the opportunity to select a community agency, assess the clients' dental hygiene needs, and implement a dental hygiene plan in the same way that they will have to do when hired as a dental hygienist. A faculty member who teaches music appreciation created a service learning project in which students interact one-on-one with the children of migrant workers in Homestead, Florida. Over 100 children have received music instruction, and the numbers continue to grow. Service learning students develop an appreciation of music both within the class and through their service placement by seeing the love of music develop in the children (Exley, Gottlieb, and Young, 2000).

Albuquerque TVI Community College

Albuquerque TVI Community College also began their service learning initiative in 1994 as an AACC-funded service learning initiative. The program began with the selection of two faculty members who were each given one course release a semester to coordinate the program. They began with twelve faculty and 137 students and jumped to 35 faculty and 225 students within the first two years. By the end of the third year, the college funded a full-time service learning coordinator position, and supported a faculty liaison position through continued course releases. One project example is the Washington Middle School Greenhouse Project. Through discussions with school administrators, a service learning project emerged that paired TVI carpentry students with Washington Middle School industrial shop students in order to jointly create a much needed biology greenhouse for the middle school students. The TVI carpentry students gained more experience in carpentry while providing mentoring to the middle school students. When finished, biology students at the middle school began growing native plants to be placed in a city park and vegetables to be sold at a farmers market, with any surplus being donated to one of Albuquerque's homeless shelters. Mayor Jim Baca dedicated the greenhouse project in the spring of 1998, simultaneously announcing a city-funded scholarship for service learning students in environmental studies (Garcia, 2000).

Conclusion

Service learning is one technique that is increasingly included in the pedagogical toolbox used by educators. Successful programs offer orientations for students, faculty, and community agency representatives; require some form of reflection for service learning students; connect the program to existing initiatives; track outcomes; and celebrate successes. Supporters argue that service learning prepares people for the responsibility of living in a democratic society, allows students to explore career possibilities, exposes students to different cultures, and encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, and Geschwind, 2000; and Robinson, 1999/2000). Others remain skeptical about what can be accomplished with service learning. Parker-Gwin and Mabry (1998) found that service learning students developed slightly less favorable attitudes toward community service after one semester of program participation, while Shiarella, McCarthy, and Tucker (2000) cited the beliefs thatservice learning can weaken the curriculum and place a burden on faculty members' time. Further research on the outcomes and effects of service learning programs is needed to resolve such concerns. Overall, service learning appears to be a concept worth exploring by anyone interested in adopting new techniques to enhance learning in the classroom.

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